

Flora Malesiana: A Review

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FLORA MALESIANA, "an Illustrated Systematic Account of the Malaysian Flora"; published under the auspices of the Kebun Raya Indonesia, Bogor, Java, the Botanic Gardens of Indonesia, and the Rijksherbarium, Leyden, Netherlands; prepared on an international cooperative basis; general editor, Dr. C. G. G. J. van Steenis, Director of the Flora Malesiana Foundation; published by Noordhoff-Kolff N.V., Djakarta. Published to date: three volumes of series I, e.g., I (1), I (4), and I (5), as follows: 1: i-clii, 1-639 (1950); 4: i-ccxix, 1-631 (1948-54); 5: i-ccxlii, 1-595 (1955-58).

Volume I comprises a cyclopaedia of collectors, with introductory chapters on methods and aims of the work, techniques of plant-collecting in the tropics, phytogeography of Malaysia, history of collections, desiderata for future collectors, and sources of information for the cyclopedic part.

Volume 4 contains an introduction and general considerations (by van Steenis), a history of the descriptions of Malaysian plants (by H. C. de Wit), keys (by van Steenis), dates of publication of source works (by M. J. van Steenis-Kruseman and W. T. Stearn), and a series of taxonomic revisions of more than 60 families (by various authors).

Volume 5 consists of a list of selected bibliography, abbreviations used in citations, a long part on the philosophy of specific and infraspecific delimitation, and a supplement (no. I) to the cyclopaedia of collectors, and further revisions (of 24 families, by various authors), with indices.

The series I, Spermatophyta, (and presumably the other series, to include other plant groups) contains, besides the various other types of information, the core of the work, which is a revised modern systematic treatment of the plants of Malaysia, with keys, diagnoses, references, synonyms, distributional notes, ecological notes, and information pertaining to the uses of both wild and cultivated species.

The undertaking is an enormous one of the greatest importance, and the perseverance of the editors and the quality of this achievement, in spite of considerable difficulties (not the least of which has been the split in Dutch-Indonesian relations resulting in a lack of financial support) has excited both admiration and awe.

From a botanical point of view, the *Flora* commands the greatest respect. The editorial policy is exemplary, resulting in a uniform treatment that makes for clarity; while the numerous scientists, many working in Holland, but others in other countries, have maintained the highest standards in their work. Especially valuable is the section in volume 5 on specific and infraspecific delimitation. Although on occasion verging on redundancy, there is a great deal of wisdom in it, of both the practical and the philosophical kind, drawn from long experience with tropical plants. This section ought to be required reading for all botanists, especially those who are working with tropical plants. At the end of this section 70 precepts are listed, intended both as guides for preparers of the *Flora* and to botanists in general. The last two bear repeating here: "Phytography requires besides a love and esteem for the métier, a memory for forms, great patience and care, a never-ending self-criticism, continuous concentrated observation of details, a great tenacity for mastering facts, as well as a balanced and unprejudiced outlook." "Be always prepared to solicit disinterested criticism from experienced colleagues whose work you admire. Try to conquer a natural, human dislike and inertia to drastic improvements and emendations in agreement with your responsibility."

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Other significant points brought out are the need for monographic studies, rather than haphazard or localized floristic articles; the utilization of all sources of information; the synthesis, as well as the analysis, of data; brevity and clarity; conservative and meaningful taxonomy.

An interesting aspect of the work is the fact that at present it is printed entirely in English, even though begun primarily by Dutch scientists. Equally valuable is the area encompassed by the contents, including Java, Borneo, Sumatra, Celebes, the Malayan peninsula, the Philippines, New Guinea, and the myriad lesser islands in this vast area. That political boundaries have been overlooked in the favor of natural biogeographical areas is further evidence of the wise and broad perspective of the editor and his staff.

In the revisions, very full keys are presented, often two or three for each genus, in order to make as easy as possible the identification of specimens, whether sterile, in flower, or in fruit. The completeness of the documentation is beyond reproach. Synonymy is included. Illustrations are numerous; photographs and line drawings, both of very high quality, add a great deal to the value of the revisions. A few new species are described in the revisions.

To date, mainly the smaller families have been treated, but several moderately large groups—the Burseraceae, Flacourtiaceae, and Rhizophoraceae—have been completed. They are published as they are completed, rather than in any particular order. This procedure allows for the completion of volumes of comparable size in serial order, rather than bringing out innumerable small unbound parts belonging to widely scattered volumes. The binding is in handsome green leatherette and seems to be durable. The paper is of a high quality off-white nonglossy rag stock.

The only serious drawback to the work lies in its high cost, which in the United States amounts to between \$20 and \$30 per volume. Because of the withdrawal of government support by the Indonesian government, the price was raised beyond early expectations. Nonetheless, the intrinsic value of the work, together with the fact that payment for future volumes will be extended over a period of years, somewhat mollifies even the private buyer. For universities, museums, libraries, and most taxonomists or other botanists interested in the Malaysian flora, the acquisition of the series is almost mandatory. The series, when completed, undoubtedly will be the standard reference work of its type for the area for centuries to come.